Pattie Gonia Is Bullish on the Inclusive Future of the Outdoors

Co-founder of the Outdoorist Oath, Pattie Gonia discusses the importance of outdoor joy

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Pattie Gonia's costume was inspired by the western meadowlark. (Photo: Mike Fernandez/Audubon)

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Pattie Gonia is the platform-boot-wearing drag persona of Wyn Wiley, an environmental advocate and, in their words, "professional homosexual." In January, Wiley cofounded a nonprofit called Outdoorist Oath, which is committed to protecting the planet, promoting inclusion in outdoor spaces, and inspiring adventure. We caught up with Pattie to hear more about the project and why they're bullish on the inclusive future of the outdoors.

OUTSIDE: Do you have a drag philosophy?
PATTIE GONIA: My drag philosophy is have fun and be gay outdoors. Drag is a queer art form where people not only bend gender but also personify different characters and derive inspiration from fashion as well as, for me, from nature. I love using drag as a playground to represent the beauty I see in nature. I recently did a project with the Audubon Society for the western meadowlark, the state bird of my home state of Nebraska as well as my current home of Oregon. There was a beautiful ecosystem that brought the project together. Two amazing designers created this dress, complete with ten-foot wingspan. They used plants from the grasslands where the bird lives to dye the fabrics. We got to meet with queer bird experts to learn about queer behavior in birds, along with the threat of habitat loss. It was a cool intersection of fashion, art, and activism.

Tell me about the Outdoorist Oath.
The Oath was founded because I, Teresa Baker [creator of the Outdoor CEO Diversity Pledge], and José González [founder of Latino Outdoors] believe that individuals have the power to shape the future of the outdoors. We have so many tools that teach us how to treat nature, but we have very few that teach us how to treat each other. And so the Oath hopes to help individuals create their own personalized plan of action to create change locally. If we can create a culture that connects people to nature and shows them what's worth fighting for, we can help people see that being an environmentalist can be part of your everyday life. What that looks like at the Oath is workshops and education models. Right now we teach workshops online, but we're in the process of making curricula we can put in educators' hands.

What are you trying to teach people through those workshops?
I think we have to make space for people to mess up. Shame and fear never work as motivators. I want places that are filled with relationships and joy—those things make people come back and take action. It's like a new muscle. You're not going to be good at it early on. Hell, I wasn't good at it. I'm still not good at it. There's no recipe for how to do allyship.

How has this first year been for the organization?
We've gotten a crash course in the nonprofit-industrial complex and just how hard it is to set up an organization. It's hard behind the scenes, but it's worth it because this community is unbelievable. We've educated thousands of people. We've succeeded in fundraising enough to support our team. I have such respect for anyone in the nonprofit field. It requires so many hoops to jump through, and it's no wonder there's not more diversity in the nonprofit space.

What else have you been working on?
I've spoken at lots of universities. I've gotten to visit Outdoor Outreach, an amazing nonprofit in San Diego getting underrepresented communities outdoors. And a lot of my effort and energy have been focused on Brave Trails, which is a summer camp for queer kids that also provides mental health services year-round. They do family camps to help teach parents how to accept their kids. Additionally, they educate other camps about how to be inclusive to the queer community. It makes me think about how much better my own summer camp experience could have been if space had been made for me as a queer kid.

You also relaunched the Queer Outdoor and Environmental Job Board over the summer. Can you talk about why that has been important to you?
Since creating Pattie Gonia, I have seen so many queer people who wanted a job in the outdoor industry but didn't know where it was safe to work. I also saw so much interest from brands and nonprofit organizations who wanted to hire queer people but didn't know how to find them. The job board was sparked from that. Last year I launched it with a Google sheet. It was scrappy but it was awesome, and we wanted it to have more functionality. A web designer named Red Fong built it out as a website. We got to pay a queer person to do what they do so well. It's been a dream project.

Any other projects keeping you busy in the day-to-day?
This might sound cliché, but I've been working on my outdoor joy, my time out of heels to connect with nature on a personal level. That's happened through running. I had no idea I would like running, but I do. That's been an important project for me this year, because it's so easy to focus on the viral journey of Pattie, but daily I've been scared shitless. I've just decided that fear and doubt are always going to exist, so I'll find queer joy outdoors, too.

How do you hope Pattie Gonia will continue to inspire others?
I never thought I could make a difference in this world. But if I could be the example for anything, it would be for people to realize that everyone has a closet to come out of, no matter what it is. Everyone has a pair of boots to put on, no matter what they are. And everyone has a beautiful life to live, if they can be their truest selves.

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Maren (she/they) is a freelance writer and audio producer. She formerly worked as an editor and podcast producer at *Outside*. She grew up in the national parks of Colorado and Utah, where she learned to love climbing, skiing, hiking, camping, and backpacking. She is queer and an advocate for intersectional LGBTQ+ representation in outdoor sports and media.

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